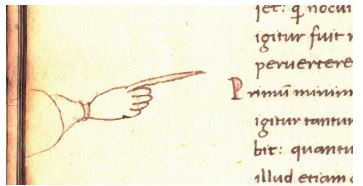


## Manicules or the 'pointing finger'

W.H Sherman, Professor of English, York University has made a comprehensive study of manicules (taken from the Latin meaning 'little hand'). Sherman states, "The problem is that everyone knows what the symbol is and does when they see it, but almost nobody knows what to call it".



The symbol is now commonly known as the 'pointing finger' and more rarely the 'mutton-fist' or

'bishop's fist'. These are the most commonly found symbols in books dating from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century. They denote an interesting part of the text and reside almost exclusively in the margins. Sherman suggests that they were a sign of ownership much like a signature or monograph, and were individual to the creator. The details of the cuffs on the sleeve, the length of the pointing finger or a decorative bracelet, for example, can all help to identify the scribe, more easily than an underlining for example. The collections at Queen's are no different and there are numerous examples of the 'pointing-finger' or manicule. An example is displayed in the exhibition.

## Bookmarks

Also displayed are two old style bookmarks which were found in books recently. One is a centre court ticket for Wimbledon and the other a receipt dated 1908 from a London bookseller. Whilst they are not directly connected to marginalia, they add another dimension to the book, linking the reader to a place and a time in much the same way as marginalia might.

## The future

The 'Information Revolution' has seen a proliferation of e-books. E-books made available on the web by publishers such as Taylor and Francis have features which mimic aspects of physical book ownership e.g. the ability to highlight important passages, add notes and bookmark pages.

Palm held reading devices such as the Sony Reader are now small enough to fit in your pocket and can deliver titles to the screen within moments. Sony claim that the benefits of the Reader are 'no more dog eared pages that you've folded over to remember your place. No need to use your train ticket as a bookmark, only to find it has slipped out'.

Permission to use illustration of MS. Bodl.602, fol. 50r (detail) 'Child carrying two sparrows'  
kindly given by Bodleian Library, Oxford University

## The Queen's College Library

# Mark My Words

*An exhibition about  
Marginalia*



## The Upper Library

2009

## Introduction

Marginalia are the manuscript additions that readers make to the books they read. For the purposes of this small exhibition, this has been taken to mean anything that has been written, doodled, scribbled, argued or exclaimed in the pages of a book.

A more precise definition of the term limits marginalia to annotations and notes directly connected to the text.

## History

Marginalia have existed for centuries and were originally encouraged as a form of communication when books and paper were in short supply. Sir Walter Raleigh wrote a personal statement in margins just before his execution, while Voltaire composed in book margins whilst in prison.

The word *marginalia* was coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose friends encouraged him to annotate their books, adding considerable worth to their collections. They became an extended personal reflection of the text, a contemporary comment on the thoughts of the reader in response to the written word.

Marginalia became less fashionable in the 1800's, but there are still some examples of contemporary significance. For example, Nelson Mandela

annotated a copy of Julius Caesar whilst imprisoned on Robben Island, putting his initials next to the phrase 'Cowards die many times before their deaths', before passing it onto the next inmate.



## Binders' Blanks

Binders' Blanks are a feature of early printed books. These are blank pages bound into a book to provide white space for writing on. Binders' blanks also act as dividers between different sections of the book.

The example in the exhibition is of a blank page that has been used to make notes and is located between two sections of the book. The blank page has created the opportunity for what is in effect extended marginalia. Margins in this book are also used extensively for comments. A faint pencil *manicule* (pointing finger) can be seen in this example. Binders' blanks can often be a rich source of research material.

## The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath



The copy of *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath has been kindly lent by a current undergraduate and is a good example of modern customisation. The use of post-it notes, a scourge of libraries because they leave a sticky residue behind, is a common feature. It is an effective way in which to reference the important passages and is unique to the owner. In addition to the referencing the book is heavily annotated. There are loose notes inside the book which are quotations from 'The Bell Jar'.

If left lying around this copy, though precious to the owner, would be unloved and unwanted. Or would it? The notes are a contemporary response to the text, indicative of their times. Are these scribbling worthless? Would their significance change if the owner became an authority on Sylvia Plath? Researchers of the future might then pore over this copy to track the development of thought. Would the value of the copy then lie in the fact that it has supplementary material and fuller information than other copies?